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S E C R E T PANAMA 000127

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/05/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PM](#)
SUBJECT: PANAMA: VP/FM DISCUSSES DARIEN OPTIONS WITH
AMBASSADOR

Classified By: Ambassador Barbara J. Stephenson for reasons 1.4 (b) and
(d)

SOUTHCOM Assistance

11. (S//NF) First VP and FM Samuel Lewis met with the Ambassador on February 4 to discuss the situation in the Darien and the Ambassador's recent meetings at SOUTHCOM in response to Lewis' December 12 request for USG planning assistance for Darien operations. The Ambassador told Lewis that SOUTHCOM was prepared to send an assessment team of four to six officers to Panama to evaluate the situation in the Darien, the GOP's requirements, and recommend whether SOUTHCOM can assist within its existing authorization to train, equip and advise Panamanian forces in non-lethal operations, and what other authorizations it might need to provide help. Lewis thanked the Ambassador, and said that National Security Advisor Marcel Salamin and National Frontier Service (SENAFRONT) Director Frank Abrego would be the points of contact for the team, expected to arrive in mid-March.

Whole of Government Approach

12. (S//NF) The Ambassador told Lewis that SOUTHCOM had shared lessons learned from the successful Colombian effort against the FARC. These lessons highlighted the importance of addressing the problem of "under-governed" spaces, where irregular groups are able to build up local support structures in the absence of a strong host nation government presence. The best way to address under-governed spaces was through a "whole of government" approach to reducing the influence of irregular groups in such areas. In the case of Panama, that meant that SENAFRONT could only be one element of a strategy to drive out the irregulars. An increasing and sustained presence by education, health, economic development and other governmental agencies, in addition to law enforcement, would also be required. The Ambassador noted that the Embassy could bring some resources to support such a strategy, such as elements of the Merida Initiative, some SOUTHCOM funded programs such as Humanitarian Assistance Programs, and medical readiness training exercises, and that we were attempting to secure other resources to directly support such a strategy. She said the assessment team would also look at how SOUTHCOM might be able to assist with

planning such a strategy, taking advantage of the experience gained in Colombia. Lewis concurred with the need to approach the problem as one of governance, and noted that the GOP had just approved funding to expand the runway in Meteti to ease access to the Darien. He also reviewed a variety of air assets - a mix of helicopters and small planes - that will be coming on line starting late February, adding that the government of Colombia had in the end not agreed to lease Panama helicopters.

Legal Framework

13. (S//NF) The Ambassador, carrying a copy of the Geneva Convention, noted that the visit to SOUTHCOM had also helped clarify the legal framework for any future operations against the FARC elements in the Darien. She explained to Lewis that in Colombia the conditions were met for using the law of armed conflict (e.g., control of territory, ranks, uniforms) which allowed, under some circumstances, for the Colombian military to act against the FARC using military means and tactics, rather than police means and tactics. In Panama, the Ambassador explained, where these conditions are not met, operations properly fall under law enforcement rules of engagement. She told Lewis that any recommendations from the SOUTHCOM assessment team would, of course, be consistent with international law. Lewis told the Ambassador that he fully understood and agreed with this evaluation.
STEPHENSON